

Austerity hits healthcare access in Europe: NGO

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Austerity measures in Europe have hit the poorest hardest by limiting access to healthcare, a medical charity said Monday, as it called for every EU resident to have equal access to public health facilities.

In its annual survey of European healthcare access, the Medecins du Monde non-governmental organisation said all pregnant women must have access to termination, plus antenatal and postnatal care.

MdM provides healthcare to vulnerable populations and bears witness to obstacles in healthcare access.

The report, launched in London, is entitled "Access to healthcare for people facing multiple health vulnerabilities: obstacles in access to care for children and pregnant women in Europe".

"While the economic crisis and austerity measures have resulted in an overall increase in unmet health needs in most countries, the most destitute... have been hit the hardest," it said.

These were often found to be migrants.

MdM held 22,171 face-to-face consultations in 2014 with patients in Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Around three-quarters of them were from outside the European Union.

The report, based on these consultations, "paints a bleak picture of the 'cradle of human rights'," said MdM.

The organisation said 63 percent of the people it saw in Europe had no free-to-access healthcare coverage. Fewer than half of the children seen were properly immunised against tetanus or measles, mumps and rubella.

Meanwhile more than half of the pregnant women had not had access to antenatal care before coming to MdM.

"MdM urges member states and EU institutions to ensure universal public health systems built on solidarity, equality and equity, open to everyone living in an EU member state," it said in its conclusions.

"All children residing in Europe must have full access to national immunisation schemes and to paediatric care. All pregnant women must have access to termination of pregnancy, antenatal and postnatal care and safe delivery.

"Seriously ill migrants must be protected from expulsion when effective access to adequate healthcare cannot be ensured in the country to which they are expelled.

"MdM... exhorts all health professionals to take care of all patients regardless of their administrative status and the existing legal barriers."

Plight of Mediterranean migrants

At the report launch, Lesley Page, president of Britain's Royal College of Midwives professional body, said the exclusion of people from healthcare access was "one of the greatest tests of our humanity at this time".

British volunteer doctor Clare Shortall spoke of working with immigrant mothers who have been given a hefty bill after the death of their newborn babies.

Some migrants avoid health facilities for fear of arrest.

Meanwhile MdM leaders said the plight of migrants risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Africa to Europe could not be ignored.

Nikitas Kanakis, president of MdM's Greek branch, said they had seen as many patients in the last few months as they would normally treat in a year.

"They have what we call the sickness of the refugee," he said.

"They arrive in a very bad situation. They have problems mainly because they sleep out, they are not eating very well.

"This has a tremendous impact on their health.

"These people, at least they should have the medical care they should have as human beings."

Thierry Brigaud, who heads the French branch, added: "When they leave home, these migrants are in good health."

He said after facing violence on their journey, they had poor and insecure living conditions when they arrive in European camps and their health deteriorates.

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